

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

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In these trying times there is a growing tendency to divert highway funds to purposes entirely foreign to road building. Unemployment relief is a pressing problem. The state legislatures and other legislative bodies, faced with the necessity of raising funds for these humanitarian purposes and reluctant to increase the burdens of property taxation, have turned in many cases to the easiest way out—the diversion of special motor vehicle imposts to relief work.

Confronted with such situations, the road administrators and those engaged in the highway industry have been at a distinct disadvantage. Their opposition to such a course is met immediately by the charge that they are unsympathetic with the needs of suffering humanity and that they are selfish and not broad-gauged in their grasp of public affairs. Citation of the facts that fundamental economic law shows the necessity of using highway or motor vehicle revenues exclusively for road and street purposes and that improved roads pay such enormous dividends that the public can not afford to do without them falls on deaf ears.

Mounting costs of government, increased tax rates, and decreased property values have also directed the attention of legislators to the diversion of road funds for general governmental purposes. Since motor vehicle imposts are practically painless in collection, the temptation arises to disregard economic law, invade road funds, and balance the governmental budget. In the face of these rank and un-American discriminations, road users and the payers of road revenues have harbored a growing resentment, but this smoldering resentment has not flamed into the fire of defensive action.

In view of these conditions, highway administrators and those engaged in the highway industry must prepare themselves to catch a little of what is commonly called "hell" by leading the fight against road fund diversions. They may do this with the satisfaction that the taxpaying public and the road user will approve and militantly support such action, once the facts are known and the problem is placed in the search-light of popular understanding.

Relief work must go on; government must be supported and perpetuated; but the funds for such work must and will ultimately be derived from taxes which settle themselves fairly and equitably on all classes of citizens rather than upon the road user exclusively.

When the battle to conserve road funds has been won, it will be relatively simple to determine how such road funds may be most wisely expended. The amount of road funds collected should not exceed economic needs. If the highway budget exceeds present-day necessities, the revenues should be reduced correspondingly, but funds collected for road purposes should be used for road purposes.

Traffic surveys have shown repeatedly that the savings in operating motor vehicles over improved roads as compared to unimproved roads are so great that roads are in reality self-liquidating projects and that this action takes place over a very short period. Also, road programs are the most stabilizing influence in our economic structure. Since ninety cents of the road dollar goes to labor, road building is at the same time an excellent means of employment relief, avoiding as it does the dole system and giving the public adequate returns for the money expended. Therefore, it seems conclusive that this is no time for a moratorium on road building.

FUTURE TRENDS

However, there has developed a positive and defensible tendency to reduce direct property taxes for road purposes and to use in lieu thereof special motor vehicle taxes in the form of license fees and gasoline taxes. This will undoubtedly be the trend of future road policy.

With the foregoing factors in mind, it may be predicted that future road programs must be rational, based on traffic needs, and equitably distributed. The needs of metropolitan citizens, urban dwellers, and rural people must all be met and road revenues must be distributed so as to bring this about.

Our primary road systems are reaching an advanced stage of improvement. Since such roads carry a large percentage of the total traffic, this work should be expedited so as to make available as soon as possible on these systems improved wearing surfaces suitable for traffic needs. When this has been done, our primary road programs may logically consist in the main of refinements, relocations, widenings, grade separations, and betterments for those systems.

Closely related to primary road work is the city street problem. Statistical surveys indicate that about ninety per cent of special motor vehicle taxes are collected from urban dwellers and that a large percentage of traffic is carried by city streets. These facts can not be dodged, and equity as well as traffic necessity demands greater recognition of city street work in our highway budgeting. All state funds devoted to such work should be safeguarded by adequate state supervision. The city dweller has paid a large part of the cost of rural road programs. Likewise, he contributed a large percentage of the traffic on rural roads. But these facts only intensify the fairness of the claim of the city dweller for part

of the highway funds as soon as primary rural roads reach an advanced stage of completion. City work should first be concentrated in extensions of state primary highways so as to give continuity of good surface through all towns. When this need has been met, other heavily-traveled and generally-used streets should not be dissipated on a hit-or-miss city street program, but should be used logically on thoroughfares of general motor use.

Adequate consideration of primary roads and city streets should not overshadow the great importance of secondary or "farm-to-market roads." The development of this highway system will mean lower transportation cost, lower food prices, lower taxes, and a more well-knit social and economic structure. On such roads, the type of improvement should be in accord with traffic needs. Stage construction may well be used and so planned that each stage of improvement will permit additional development without economic loss.

In order to plan these road programs of the future with intelligence, fundamental traffic and economic facts must be had. This emphasizes the importance of searching tax studies and commonsense traffic surveys, interpreted by experienced highway administrators for the guidance of legislative bodies.

Highway research must be continued, and encouraged. Much notable work has already been done. From extensive researches, such as the Illinois Bates road test, have been developed the modern principles of paved road design and construction. The same searching study should be made of the problem of producing scientifically at least cost of service road surfaces suitable for secondary road development.

The foregoing statements represent the writer's view of some of our future highway problems and answer in a limited way the question, "Where do we go from here?" But the inescapable fact remains that we are going nowhere in highway development unless we win the battle already raging and prevent further diversion of highway funds.

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF OUR HIGHWAY FINANCING METHODS

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For at least fifteen years, our main highway problem was to build roads fast enough to take care of the ever-increasing traffic. Administrative and construction methods have improved steadily, and billions of dollars have been contributed by owners of real estate and motor vehicles. While few high-